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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000195

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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS, EAP/PD and DRL

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TAGS: PHUM KPAO KISL BX
SUBJECT: MEDIA OUTLETS PRACTICE SELF-CENSORSHIP IN BRUNEI

REF: BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 172

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Charge and ECA Assistant recently met with the Home Editor of the Brunei Times who described how self censorship operates in practice within the framework of the Sedition Act which gives the Government of Brunei authority to monitor media content. The Brunei Times, a 2 year old independent daily is compelled to practice self-censorship when it comes to domestically sensitive topics like government policies, religion and royalty. END SUMMARY.

SEDITION ACT = RESTRICTIONS

¶2. (SBU) Media outlets like the Brunei Times tend to practice self censorship in response to one particular law - the 2005 Sedition Act. The Sedition Act restricts press freedom in the country by classifying offense as "directly or indirectly lower or adversely affect the rights, status position, discretion, powers, privileges, sovereignty, or prerogatives of the sultan, his spouse, successors, or other members of the royal family." The act also makes it an offense to "directly or indirectly lower or adversely affect the standing or prominence of the national philosophy, the Malay Islamic Monarchy concept." Usually referred to by its Malay language acronym, this MIB philosophy is the defining ideology of the country and government administration. It supports Islam as the state religion and monarchical rule as the sole governing system, and upholds the rights and privileges of the Brunei Malay race.

¶3. (U) The Sedition act also permits the prosecution of any publisher, proprietor, or editor of a newspaper that publishes matter having a seditious intention. Publication of the newspaper may be suspended for up to one year, and the publisher, printer, or editor can be prohibited from publishing, writing for, or editing any other newspaper. Printing equipment used in printing the newspaper can also be seized. Persons convicted under the act face fines of up to \$3,200 (B\$5,000) and jail terms of up to three years.

¶4. (U) The law requires local newspapers to obtain operating licenses and prior government approval of foreign editorial staff, journalists, and printers. The law also gives the government the right to bar distribution of foreign publications and requires distributors of foreign publications to obtain a government permit. The law allows the government to close a newspaper without giving prior notice or showing cause. Journalists deemed to have published or written "false and malicious" reports may be subjected to fines or prison sentences.

ROLE OF CENSORSHIP BOARD

¶5. (SBU) The Government of Brunei has an inter-ministerial agency

called the Censorship Board consisting of officials from Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Prime Minister's Office (including the Internal Security Department). The Censorship Board's main purpose is to screen and determine suitability of public performances (such as concerts, movies and cultural shows). This board does not, however, review or control local print publications. Foreign publications dealing with any religious content, particularly materials posing a challenge to Shafi'i Islam and the MIB concept may be banned. Religious authorities also review general publications to ensure compliance with social norms. For example, post has seen copies of women's fashion magazines with cleavage or legs concealed with black ink.

¶16. (SBU) For domestically produced publications, depending on the subject matter, public relations officers or equivalent at the appropriate ministry act as the monitor for compliance with the Sedition Act (e.g., matters related to royalty are handled by the Prime Minister's Office). According to our media contacts, public relations officers pay the most attention to and usually complain when the full titles of the Sultan, royalty or state dignitaries are not or incorrectly used. As it is considered safer to avoid trying to analyse the Sultan's titah (royal speech/command), the local press usually quote the speech directly. Only the Brunei Times has taken the extra step of summarizing and highlighting key messages.

JOURNALISTS FACE TOUGH TIMES

¶17. (SBU) In the case of the privately owned/independent Brunei Times, story selection is managed by the Chief Editors. The Board of Directors (made up of prominent local

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businessman) only intervenes on the publication of domestically sensitive topics such as national security, royalty and religion.

¶18. (SBU) Ms. Shareen Han, nominated for the FY09 IVLP- E.R. Murrow Program for Journalists, told us that the Times strives to deliver a "balanced and constructive criticism" in relation to GOB policies and activities. A pioneer at investigative journalism, one of Ms. Han's notable articles focused on the problem of rampant intellectual property piracy in Brunei, a core policy challenge for our bilateral relationship. Shareen began her investigation with internet research because GOB authorities would not comment or give her information on this topic. Upon gathering material/information for the article, Shareen consulted GOB authorities for confirmation or comment but except for the Police Enforcement Unit, no one was willing to comment, even off the record.

¶19. (SBU) Government officers' reluctance to comment can reach absurd levels. In one case, Han told us that the Time's journalists were told by a mid-level government official not to publish a speech he had just delivered at a public forum. When journalists are challenged about the content of their stories, it is usually only after publication and often by the very same public relations officers who declined requests for on-the-record or background information on the subject to contribute to the story.

COMMENT: PRESS FREEDOM A LONG WAY OFF

¶110. (SBU) In a close knit, highly protocol-oriented society like Brunei offering diverse viewpoints and criticism of the government can quickly cut close to family and friends of journalists. Local customs and beliefs teach individuals to show deference to authorities, which for the Press often means that asking challenging questions is considered impolite and intrusive.

¶111. (SBU) Post will continue to identify young journalists like Ms. Han for professional training to help her and her colleagues develop the skills they need to push for greater openness and more constructive criticism in the Brunei media. Until Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah sends a clear and unambiguous signal to his subjects that Brunei needs to open the public space for wider

debate, some of the best societal debate will be confined to the blogosphere. Post's top five blogs sites to watch are:

Debating Brunei (<http://debatingbrunei.blogspot.com>)
Brunei Resources (<http://bruneiresources.blogspot.com>)
Maurina (<http://maurina.wordpress.com>)
Emmagooodegg (<http://emmagooodegg.blogs.com>)
Anak Brunei (<http://anakbrunei.com>)

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